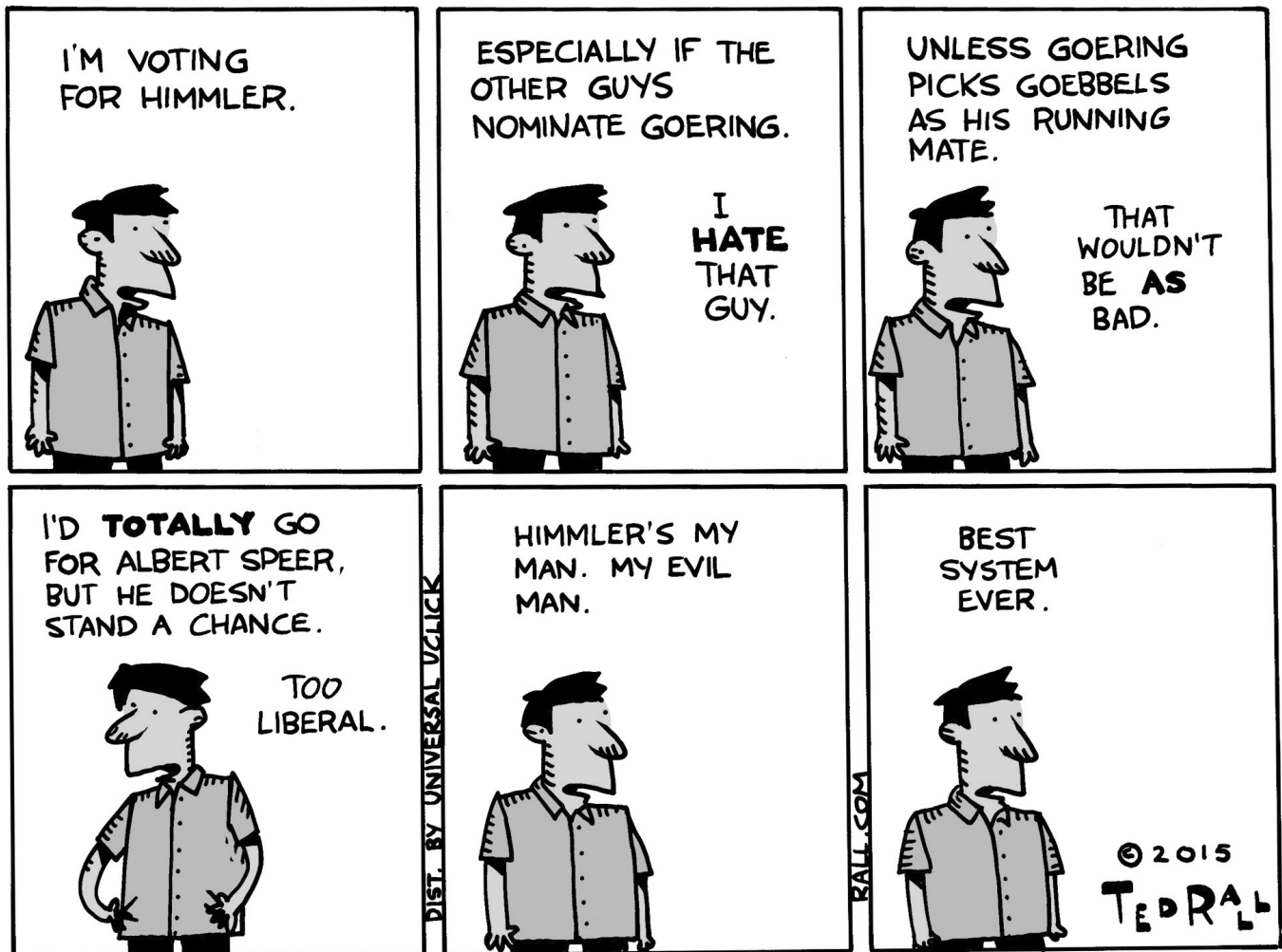


The Two-Party System in the United States:

Its Origins and Evolution
in the Service of
Power, Privilege and Capital

by Mark A. Lause



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Reprinted from *Against the Current*

THIS FOUR-PART SERIES by historian Mark A. Lause is a conversation on the history and evolution of the two-party system in the United States, a sacrosanct pillar of capitalist political “stability” in this country. These articles have been published in issues 173-176 of *Against the Current*. Mark Lause is the author of several books including *Race and Radicalism in the Union Army* (2009) and the newly published *A Secret Society History of the Civil War* (University of Illinois Press, 2014).

Media, the schools, and the other great institutions of American civilization used to tell us that the two-party system was the envy of the world. They did so with great repetition but without dwelling too much on our actual experience with it. That’s a much harder sell nowadays, but the dominant institutions and their paid pundits still agree that the system works and that only naïve ideologues challenge it.

This brief review of the experience with the two-party system is the story of power and how wealthy white gentlemen chose to structure it. Initially accorded no role in the process, native peoples, African-Americans, Latinos, laboring people of European descent and women had their impact on events through other means. The most successful of these challenges, though, required understanding the structures of power that dominated their society.

That certainly remains the case if there’s any hope today of successfully breaking through the Democratic Party’s stranglehold on social movements. What freedom the American people generally enjoyed they attained through their own actions. They did not achieve these gains through the two-party system but demonstrably in spite of it.

The relevance of this discussion is increasingly evident in the wake of the November 2014 midterm elections, with the Congressional ascendancy of rightwing Republicans, the continuing debacle of the centrist corporate Democrats, and signs of a potential emerging independent political challenge.

Such possibilities can be seen for example in the strong showings of Green gubernatorial candidate Howie Hawkins in New York, independent socialist Angela Walker running for Milwaukee County sheriff, the victory of the Richmond Progressive Alliance in that California city, and previously the election of socialist candidate Kshama Sawant to Seattle City Council.

How to build from these and similar candidacies toward a break from the stranglehold of the capitalist parties is a critical and urgent discussion for the left. We hope that this historical survey contributes to understanding how the two-party system, which the author calls America’s “other peculiar institution,” is not a political law of nature but rather a long-lasting tool of ruling class control through many periods of social and economic turmoil. For the movements to break out of this straitjacket requires, indeed, a new wave of thinking and acting. ■

Reprinted from AGAINST THE CURRENT

April 2015

SOLIDARITY • 7012 Michigan Avenue • Detroit, MI 48210
info@solidarity.us.org
www.solidarity-us.org

The Two-Party System, Part 1: The Other Peculiar Institution

By Mark A. Lause

STARTING WITH THE foundations, the American political system, like its social order and economic structure, began as a New World variation of that in Britain. The United States constituted a republic of sorts, though the representative features of its government remained inherently weak, allowing coequal status to deliberately unrepresentative and unelected branches of government.

Almost immediately, a party system appeared, promising to deepen these representative features by offering voters input into the decision-making processes in giving them options at the polls. These parties would accomplish much of what they hoped, until the people cast ballots for serious and radical change — precipitating the fatal crisis of the 1860s.

Despite a tumultuous 17th century, the British made arrangements that permitted their rise to global prominence. With the monarchy restored but strictly limited in its function, the two chambers of the Parliament (Commons and Lords) had effective rule of the country. The day-to-day functions of the government hardly concerned the average English subject on either side of the Atlantic, since the Parliament did not district itself to represent changes in the population and, more importantly, because the suffrage remained restricted to the propertied.

As a result, the Parliament remained preoccupied with balancing the concerns of the landed gentry with the needs of urban commerce. Their predispositions created distinct caucus in the Parliament, and these “caucus parties” — the Whigs and Tories — represented the most important model for what became the U.S. party system.

The American colonists incorporated these essential features of 18th century British politics into their own system. They adopted a two-chambered legislative body, a distinct court system, and almost everywhere served alongside the Crown-appointed royal governors. There are some historians who also argue for embryonic caucuses emerging within the colonial assemblies, reflecting tensions between the more commercial coastal towns and more parochial agricultural interests.

Despite periodic friction at having the ultimate governing power overseas, these general political structures worked because those who used them had no intention of representing any social or economic interest broader than those represented in the British parliamentary system. The system was of the owners and rulers, by the owners and rulers, and for the owners and rulers.

The colonial resistance to British authorities necessarily mobilized the people, particularly in the cities. These frequently hinted at a political course not only independent from

Britain but from their own home-grown masters and bosses. At times, they even tried to shape the political order that would come out of the revolution.

In the end, though, the American Revolution remained what Karl Marx and others would later describe as a *bourgeois revolution*. The propertied elite managed to prevail.

The Continental Congress always based its claim of legitimacy not on the popular movements but on those older colonial structures. With few exceptions, those bodies — from the Virginia House of Burgesses to the colonial assemblies of New England — pressed for independence and established what became a common government of the United States on their authority.

Despite some promising movements for something more, the governments after independence remained no less committed than before to maintaining an idea of rights rooted first and foremost on ownership. They maintained upper houses of the legislative bodies expressly intended not to be representative of population, sometimes by means of higher property requirements and, nationally, by vesting the authority of the upper house on the state legislatures and according each state two senators, regardless of the state’s population. (U.S. Senators were not elected by popular vote until 1914, after ratification of the 17th Amendment.)

At its heart, *the principal property these governments strove to protect were African slaves*. Despite the importance of property in land or in the means of commerce, such as shipping, slaves remained essential to the plantation production of tobacco. This became the new nation’s most important asset, even as half the former colonies took measures to eliminate the “peculiar institution,” while the other discovered the Transatlantic importance of cotton to the Industrial Revolution.

The national government reflected this imperative. For 32 of the first 36 years of the United States, Virginia slaveholders occupied the presidency. While George Washington had clear concerns about slavery and took measures to manumit his own slaves, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison and James Monroe did nothing on the subject.

In hindsight we might see slavery or the extermination of native peoples as key questions, but neither actually made a dent on the preoccupations of the national party system which began to emerge.

The “First” Party System

From the earliest days of the new republic, the Founders cautioned against the formations of “factions” and parties that would constitute interests capable of short-circuiting their carefully planned constitutional systems of checks and balanc-

es. Almost immediately, though, they went about the process of developing parties along British lines. Thus caucuses tended to take shape within legislatures and quickly began to function like permanent parties.

Distinctive and often conflicting interests divided the sectional elites as well as different economic and social concerns within those sectional elites. Almost immediately, though, they began grouping into a faction around Alexander Hamilton, urging the use of Federal policies to foster commerce and industry, and a broad, complex opposition by those who suspected that such Federalist policies would cause even more problems.

In foreign affairs, they strove for reconciliation with Britain, and disassociated their American Revolution from the 1789 revolution that had broken out in France, America's old ally in attaining independence.

Although aloof from these tensions, the consummate nationalist George Washington sympathized with the Federalists. His vice president and successor to the presidency, John Adams, overtly embraced the new Federalist Party. And only a few years after adopting the Bill of Rights, the Federalists secured passage of legislation criminalizing dissent as "sedition," initiating a series of prosecutions against critics of the government.

Thomas Jefferson became the dominant figure in the opposition, winning the election over John Adams in "the Revolution of 1800." Although only a small portion of the population could vote, the decision is often cited as an example of how voters can have an impact and peacefully replace the administration in power. In this account, the voters in 1800 picked between the more agrarian and egalitarian, if exclusively white and patriarchal, republican future envisioned by Jefferson, and the Hamiltonian future of commerce, industries and cities.

In what voters wanted really shaped policy, we'd presumably now be living virtuously on our small farms.

The rivalry of the Federalists and Democratic-Republicans, the party associated with Jeffersonian ideas, lacked many features of the two-party system that evolved later. The government over which it contended remained largely confined to the gentlemen of the eastern seaboard, and the suffrage remained everywhere confined to property owners.

However, the system did represent the earliest clash in the United States between institutionalized parties, and established many of its key features. Just as the Founders warned against parties, they embraced a constitutional order that had no provision for expanding the country. Jefferson, the "strict constructionist," is particularly remembered for the Louisiana Purchase, doubling the size of U.S. territory.

Jefferson's successor James Madison presided over the first, ill-considered attempt of the government to directly subjugate not just native peoples but its neighbors of European background by seizing Canada (the War of 1812) while Britain remained preoccupied with the Napoleonic Wars. However, the invasion backfired and the winding down of the European Wars freed thousands of British veterans to handle America.

The United States barely survived, but the Federalists who had opposed the war virtually disappeared outside of New England, while the party that took the country into the

maelstrom rode a tide of patriotism to become not only the dominant party but really the only national party.

Jefferson, for his part, had declared in his inaugural address, "We are all Republicans, we are all Federalists." By 1813, the triumphant advocate of an agrarian future for the United States, declared that America could only secure its independence through Hamilton's course and foster manufacturing capitalism. While the Democratic-Republicans tended to differ from the Federalists on the rationale for the distant French Revolution, both agreed about the mortal danger of the slave revolt it helped to trigger in Santo Domingo.

Early on, then, there seemed to be enough reason to question the whole idea that citizens can express their interests by choosing between two alternatives preselected for them.

The "Second Party System"

A new party system emerged in the wake of the War of 1812. In those years, the United States reestablished its vital economic ties with Britain and began to exploit more thoroughly the potential of the cotton gin, particularly in the lower Mississippi Valley. The new industries in Britain needed cotton, giving rise to the first great American fortunes, based upon a plantation system that imposed a more rigorous and brutal kind of African slavery.

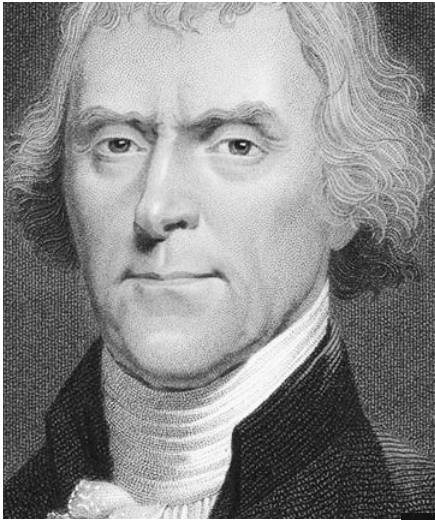
The end of the legal Transatlantic slave trade radically increased the value of these owned workers, and created closer ties between the Deep South that produced cotton on a massive scale and the Upper South and Border slave states in the lucrative business of supplying new slaves. Although entrepreneurial and exploitive in the most modern sense, the plantation economy clothed itself in the guise of traditional paternalism.

Alongside this, the states during these years began revisiting the property requirement for voting. Starting with Connecticut and New York, the states began lifting these, though usually revising their constitutions to specify white males only, eliminating the rare instances of voting by propertied women or men of color. The process came easily in places, though it sparked a brief civil war in Rhode Island and certainly proceeded much slower in the slave South.

The involvement of more Americans in the electoral process provided the owners and rulers of the nation a government they could still master easily enough while generally assuring that it would not become dangerously unpopular. This arrangement required reaching beyond the limited East Coast and propertied electorates to masses of ordinary white voters across much of the country.

The new challenge required governing and stabilizing a national political order for the elites while creating ongoing mechanisms to win popular mandate. Newspapers expanded and proliferated, and the steam presses got the "penny press" into the hands of voters. Older popular political associations evolved into societies capable of building and sustaining modern city political machines.

In the 1820s, a new Democratic Party rose against the remnants of the older party of Jefferson, the National Republicans, who adopted the name Whigs in the 1830s. The Democrats rose from a variety of local oppositional currents, with the growing interests of the cotton plantations increasingly dominant. After losing the 1824 election, Democratic leader Andrew



Thomas Jefferson (above) and John Adams (right), standard bearers of the earliest political parties.

Jackson gained two terms in the White House and set the tone for what remained the dominant national party for the next 30 years.

The first president from west of the Appalachians, Jackson embodied the Democratic convergence of the interests of the South and the

West. Personally involved in the schemes of Aaron Burr, Jackson had also had a heavy hand in the U.S. acquisition of West Florida and Florida, laying the foundations for the Anglo colonization of Texas, then belonging to Spain, and then an independent Mexico. In part, the plantations' rapid depletion of the soil provided a particular imperative for western expansion.

Democrats also spoke in Northern accents, thanks to proponents of expansion in the newly settled Midwest with various immigrant-based new political machines in the northeastern cities. Indeed, three of the other four Democratic presidents elected in this period — Martin Van Buren, Franklin Pierce and James Buchanan — came from the North. However, they owed their national prominence to the South. The fate of the first, Van Buren (defeated for reelection in 1840), demonstrated what would happen if they did not march lock step with the desire of the Southern states.

Democrats appealed to dominant cultural concerns and ideological assumptions of most white voters. Democratic hostility to chartered monopolies — rhetorical and rarely real — appealed to faith that the mythical “free market” provided the best way to ensure individual opportunity, fair play and mobility among the economic players. Newly expanded newspapers, educational institutions, and the dominant currents of revived Christianity embraced the innate virtue of wealth, business success and hard work.

During this period, the Whigs offered the respectable opposition to the Democrats. They advocated energetic government action to foster “internal improvement” through the vigorous imposition of tariffs on imports. Their principal proponent Henry Clay described this as “the American system.”

In the end, though, what the parties nationally presented as deep differences often boiled down to fighting over specific measures. That is, the differences largely revolved around the extent to which the government would impose tariffs or fos-

ter internal improvements.

The Whigs won national elections twice, only when Democratic unity faltered, and the Southern Democrats managed to triumph even then. In 1840, William Henry Harrison won election over Van Buren but died almost immediately, leaving the office to John Tyler, a Virginia Democrat added to the ticket to lure enough Democratic voters. In 1848 Zachary Taylor, the hero of the Mexican War, also died in office, leaving Millard Fillmore to concede to Southern demands in the last series of compromises before the crisis of the war.

This two-party rivalry defined a focus of national politics on the means by which government could aid capitalist development — and which capitalists would reap the greatest benefit. It kept the focus off issues like slavery, on which the prosperity of the country rested, and, to a large extent, expansion.

In fact, the system did whatever it could, wherever it could to keep slavery quiet. It nationally barred abolitionist literature from the mail, and Northern Democrats invented the color bar at the local level and, as early as the mid-1830s, actually instigated race riots to keep Northern whites hostile to people of color.

The other Democratic president elected in these years, James Knox Polk — another Tennessee slaveholder — consciously followed in the footsteps of Jackson as an expansionist proponent of what came to be called “Manifest Destiny.” He engineered the 1846 War with Mexico, the first time that the U.S. government pushed for more land. The explicit war of conquest acquired roughly as much land as had the

Louisiana Purchase 43 years earlier, attaining all the Southwest and West.

The original goal of the administration had been the conquest of the entirety of Mexico as far as the Isthmus of Panama, but the outbreak of a Mayan revolt in the Yucatan made the cotton South reluctant to annex a raging race war in which they would be in a clear minority. Nevertheless, nearly a dozen serious entrepreneurial expeditions sought to revisit the question, with the backhanded support of the most militant “Southern Rights” faction of the Democrats.

Over a thousand U.S. veterans went into the Yucatan, some half dozen private campaigns sought to acquire still more Mexican territory, several groups tried to “free” Cuba, and William Walker — once a neighbor and admirer of Jackson and Polk — led his famous forays into Nicaragua and Central America. By 1853, American mercenaries fought as far away as Ecuador. All this produced cadres that would see some use later in Kansas.

Early Workers' Parties

The prospect of allowing the property-less majority a voice in government had always raised fears in the Anglo-American world that they might somehow find their own voice, their own leaders, and actually take the government. Indeed, starting in the late 1820s, a wave of local “workingmen’s parties” appeared.

While often no more than a fanciful vote-catching label, those at Philadelphia, New York and Boston did represent



at home to keep their offices. With their 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act enabling the organization of Kansas as a new state permitting slavery, they faced open revolts in that frontier region. The responses of the government collapsed the Democratic Party north of the Mason-Dixon Line, and the Whigs had already fractured along sectional lines.

Labor and Liberty

At the former socialist community of Ceresco, land reformers, abolitionists and others held a series of meetings calling for a new third party, the Republicans — which would advocate free soil, free speech and free labor. The idea swept across the region and,

the political efforts of locally important labor organizations. Veterans of these early efforts soon turned to organizing local, city and national trade union bodies.

In New York City, former “Workies” tried to reshape the Democratic Party, the top of which was much closer to the ordinary voter in those days. They formulated the practice of non-partisan politics, by which any and all candidates would be questioned and those giving written pledges to support desired measures would win an endorsement.

Democratic legislative candidates readily gave their pledges not to charter any more monopolies, and, once they were in office, did exactly what they pledged not to do. The working-class land reform movement revived the anti-monopoly idea in the 1840s with much the same result.

After 1846, the land reformers and the abolitionist Liberty Party began running independent “Free Soil” tickets in New York and Massachusetts. By the early 1850s, they participated in the Free Democratic Party and later the Republicans. Measured by its actual results, non-partisan politics tends to lead toward independent political action.

More importantly, generations of ordinary Americans had begun to address slavery in a practical sense, by assisting the escape of runaways. By defying the Federal law mandating the return of runaway slaves, those citizens forced their neighbors generally to make decisions whether to turn them in to the authorities, and by the 1850s public resistance to this law became widespread across the non-slaveholding states.

At the insistence of the Southern politicians — who later chose to advocate “states rights” — the central government passed ever more stringent laws on the question, but citizens had already begun to make and implement their own choices.

Northern Democrats had to find a solution that both satisfied the cotton South and left them with enough voters

in six years, the Democrats split along sectional lines, the remnants of the Whigs ran their own candidate, and the third party elected Abraham Lincoln president.

This remarkable victory happened even though voting for Lincoln had not been an option in 10 Southern states. In 1860, the sovereign free-born “voting kings” of America expressed their concerns by using their ballots to pick preselected items from an electoral menu.

They elected Abraham Lincoln president of the United States, bypassing the traditional two-party rivalry of Democrats and Whigs in favor of a new third party, the Republicans. The new party raised issues, such as slavery, previously not discussed by the two parties. The largest number of participating citizens expressed what they wanted, and those who had dominated national government for a generation decided to destroy the United States rather than cede power.

The Southern rulers refused to accept the outcome of the election and began to declare their states “seceded” from the United States. The Civil War and Reconstruction that followed ended human slavery and began to restructure much about American life. These represented the most extensive political changes since the American Revolution itself. *Yet getting to choose between two parties had nothing to do with it. As far as that goes, voting in the ritual electoral sense achieved nothing in and of itself.*

The historical structuring of the two-party system — particularly the Democratic Party — made it as much an artifact of slavery as the shackles and chains. While that party as with other artifacts might be used for other things, it would rarely be as effective as for the purposes for which it was formed.

It would all depend on who actually controlled the key. ■

The Two-Party System, Part 2

A Republic Without Representation

 By Mark A. Lause

RECONSTRUCTION OF THE two-party system became essential to the general Reconstruction after the Civil War, establishing some features that remain clear today. As such, the arrangement of the parties became an essential aspect of the betrayals of associated with the Reconstruction of the post-war South.

Over the 67 years from the murder of Abraham Lincoln to the election of Franklin D. Roosevelt, most participating voters cast Republican ballots. In fact, over this long expanse, only two Democrats won the presidency, Grover Cleveland and Woodrow Wilson, both victories the result of splits among the Republicans. Despite the dominance of a Republican Party, very little happened over these years to extend the idea of representative government beyond the limitations it had for generations.

While the Republicans prevailed throughout, Americans experienced two distinct phases in the evolution of the party system. Prior to the turn of the 20th century, the reunited national government established a great deal more power over almost everything, and used it to foster industry and business almost relentlessly.

Later, the resulting social turmoil — crime and disease as well as popular discontent — required a different, more intense government regulation to keep capitalism sustainable. This regulatory authority gave the two-party system an opportunity to expand popular participation in electoral politics, while slowly making the Democrats the only respectable alternative to the dominant Republicans.

Reconstructing the Two-Party System

The fate of post-Civil War Reconstruction dashed hopes that a federal union might emerge from the war grounded in freedom and equality. This did not simply betray the promise of freedom and equality to the freed people coming out of slavery, whose constitutionally guaranteed rights were never secured.

The process began with the Native peoples, who faced the application of the Anglo-Canadian reservation policy. And it ended with turning over the poor whites to the leadership of the old secessionists. More accurately, *denial of citizenship to any part of the population fundamentally denies the entire people a representative government.* The outcome severely constrained the extent to which the government would take on a general reconstruction of how it did things in the past.

An essential if often neglected feature of this would be another Reconstruction — of the two-party system. After an

It is better to vote for what you want, and not get it, than to vote for what you don't want, and get it.

—Eugene Victor Debs

all-too-brief clash with the party's Radical caucus, the Republicans quickly took the course not just of reconciliation with the old Confederacy, but of emulating it. As the antebellum cotton factors had used all sorts of rhetoric and rationalizations to justify the use of government to promote their own interests, the postwar "Robber Barons" did the same on behalf of their own railroad and industrial concerns.

The bipartisan abandonment of Reconstruction reflected the assumption that what was good for privately owned industry was good for the nation. In the aftermath of the Civil War, government concerns focused on the development of industry, particularly the railroads. By 1883, the national and state governments gave land equivalent to the size of Texas to the railroads.

The dominant ideology became the savagery that has been called "Social Darwinism." Both parties used the army to crush rebelliousness among native peoples and against strikes. The emergence of news syndicates and services along with rising costs were beginning to restrict diversity of perspective.

Through the first decades of this period, the machine leadership of Marcus Hanna in Ohio dominated the Midwestern and national Republican Party. After Lincoln's vice president Andrew Johnson faded from the scene, the Grand Old Party elected Ulysses S. Grant, Hayes, James Garfield and William McKinley — all Midwestern Civil War heroes. Chester A. Arthur, who became president after Garfield's assassination, came from New York.

Democratic leaders appealed to the tried and true agrarian values, coupled to the concerns of small scale industry and those larger economic enterprises disadvantaged by government policy. Insofar as this base impelled the Democrats to formulate some alternative ideology, it centered on an old-fashioned agrarianism, tinged at times with some pro-regulatory reformism. Interestingly, though, the only Democrat elected president in this period, Grover Cleveland had been a "gold bug" Democrat from western New York capable of appealing to the same constituencies as the Republicans.

Major party identification had far less to do with platforms or ideas than demographics. Rural and small-town white Protestants supported the Republicans in the North and the Democrats in the South. While African Americans overwhelmingly voted Republican where they could, immigrant and Catholic voters cast Democratic ballots, as did many under the influence of big city political machines.

In short, each of the parties won elections not based on what they had delivered or promised to voters but out of fear

of the alternative. Democrats continued to use explicit appeals to white supremacy. Republicans “waved the bloody shirt,” reminding voters of the legacy of the war, and denounced Democrats as the party of “Rum, Romanism and Rebellion.”

Candidates themselves formulated the differences in often arcane rhetoric. The Republicans promised high protective tariffs that would encourage national industry, ensuring business prosperity that would trickle down to the workers as higher wages. The Democrats insisted that they, too, favored tariffs, though only to bring more revenue into the treasury. Either way you were going to have a tariff.

What the parties did offer voters were their claims to favor honest, clean government. In the critical election of 1876, both parties essentially ignored the issues of Reconstruction to campaign as reformers — Rutherford B. Hayes running as an advocate of civil service reform, against a Democratic opponent who had gained national prominence taking on the notorious Tweed Ring in New York City.

The attempt of each party to charge the other with corruption and fraud had merit on both sides. As the many critics of the political system of the day pointed out, it suited Republicans to permit a grotesque level of Democratic vote fraud in the South because they had abandoned any hope of carrying those states, and the fraud — along with its largely racial character — gave Republican orators something to discuss in the North.

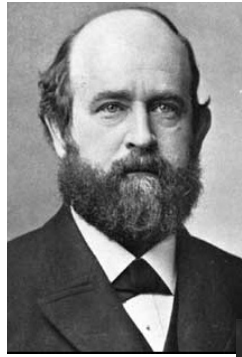
At the same time, Democrats complained of the overt Republican vote fraud in Northern factory towns where the bosses gave their workers part of the day away from the machines to ferry them in wagons to the polls for a supervised vote. This practice, too, did the Democrats no damage and gave them a counterargument to the fraud in the South.

Pressures for Change

This striving for stability by the elite inspired insurgent concerns, rooted in an abiding popular fear of unaccountable authority exercised in support of wealth and power. Massive numbers joined the local granges of the Patrons of Husbandry, which admitted women and had female officers. While this organization deferred to white Southerners by excluding African Americans, some local groups simply admitted them anyway and a number launched their own Industrial Brotherhood.

The latter merged into the regionally important Sovereigns of Industry and the Knights of Labor. More radical organizations such as the International Workingmen’s Association and kindred associations also became prominent, if remaining quite small by comparison. Organizations of African-Americans and women also appeared, their concerns focused increasingly on their civic exclusion.

These efforts engaged hundreds of thousands of Americans who learned how to organize meetings, make collective decisions, organize mass demonstrations, conduct strikes, and confront employers and the government with their demands.



Henry George, above,
and Daniel DeLeon,
right.



Their efforts to form cooperatives that would gradually displace capitalism, and the insistence of these workers on their rights to govern their own affairs in the workplace, caused no end of trouble. Mass strikes occurred regularly after the insurrectionary 1877 railroad walkout.

Many of these active citizens repeatedly tried to follow the example of the Republican Party in constructing a new, responsive third party. This wave of independent parties initially converged in the National, Independent or Greenback Party, alongside which a number of smaller, local labor parties, as well as a tiny new Social Democratic Workingmen’s Party regrouped as the Workingmen’s Party of the United States in 1876.

With the great national railroad strike of 1877, which became general strikes in places, the Greenbackers took a more explicitly pro-labor stance and the WPUS entered local politics, all gaining some success. Early in 1878, the WPUS remained itself the Socialistic Labor Party and the Greenbackers, having assimilated a number of new local labor parties, renamed itself the Greenback-Labor Party.

These converged in the 1880 presidential campaign, which raised not only the grievances of farmers and workers, but advocated woman suffrage and protested the increasing exclusion of African-Americans from civic life in the South. Afterwards, however, issues of race and sectionalism undercut the movement, though it persisted in the west. Membership in the socialists’ party went into free fall.

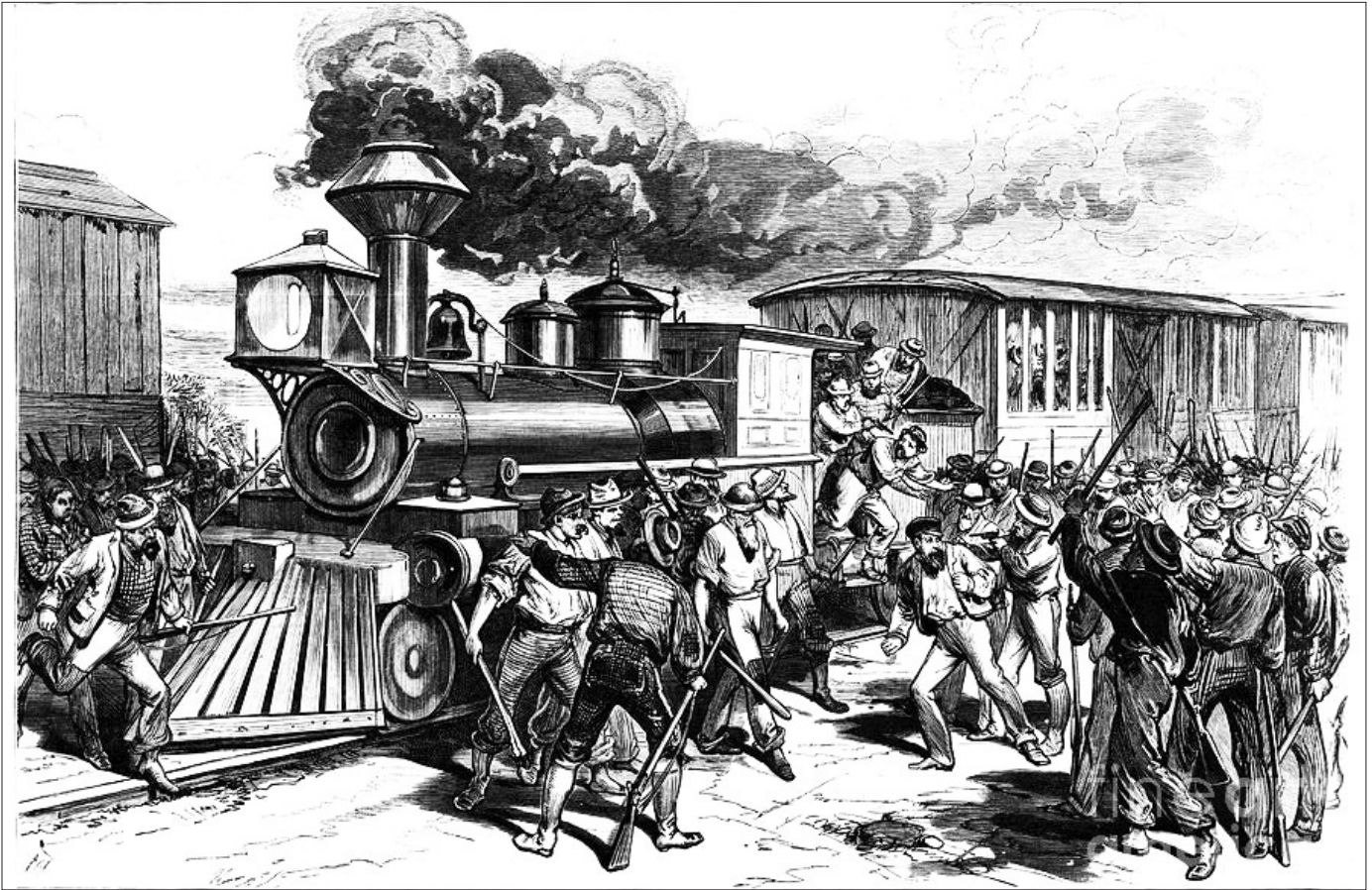
A resurgent labor movement offered other alternatives. Anarchists, with large followings at New York and Chicago, generally — though not always — avoided electoral politics. A new land reform campaign launched around Henry George’s book *Progress and Poverty* inspired massive new local labor party campaigns, notably his own mayoral race in New York City. Although the Democrats won that election — they counted the ballots — the United Labor candidate outpolled the Republican, a police commissioner named Theodore Roosevelt.

The persistent insurgency in those western centers of electoral independence — Texas and Kansas — pitted farmers against, respectively, Southern Democrats and Northern Republicans. Their organizations, together with the Knights of Labor and a range of other groups, combined to launch the People’s Party. The “Populists” were so-called because of their desire to place people above the imperatives of the profit system.

Although derailed and crushed after 1894, parts of the movement contributed directly to the emergence of a new mass socialist party. Since the Henry George campaign of 1886, Daniel DeLeon had reorganized and revitalized socialist ideas with the Socialist Labor Party. By the late 1890s, as the Populists disintegrated, elements of the SLP joined other socialist currents to form the Social Democracy — what became the Socialist Party of Eugene V. Debs.

Why Third Parties Stumbled

All these movements remained weakened by the fact that Reconstruction had imploded, which excluded legions of working people and farmers from politics, but even more fun-



Great Railroad Strike, 1877. Striking railroad workers dragging firemen and engineers from a Baltimore freight train at Martinsburg, West Virginia.

damental problems plagued them. All third-party efforts entered a game whose rules virtually assured their marginalization.

Part of nationalizing the two-party rivalry established the national faith that the system had evolved to represent the will of the voters. As we have seen, it never actually did so, but all politicians and virtually all pundits implicitly and explicitly turn every election into a well-practiced celebration of that faith.

To this day, of course, the academic, educational and journalistic industries ritually convey the litanies of this faith as part of their daily functions. As with all faiths, those unwilling to step outside of it, even temporarily, will not be able to examine the mechanics of this process critically. However, those who do so risk finding themselves heretics excluded from the self-defined "serious mainstream."

The "journalistic" component of Big Business provided an allegedly independent adjudicator for defining what would be acceptable in the aftermath of the Republican ascendancy. In his 1880 Greenback-Labor campaign, James B. Weaver got considerable coverage in the early weeks. However, when he tried to make an issue of the ballot and Black exclusion in the South, Democratic sources broke an entirely fictional story that he was in the pay of the Republicans.

The Democratic press across the country replicated the story, announcing that there was no need to cover more than one Republican contender. And the Republican papers saw no further need to discuss the third party campaign if the Democrats were not doing so.

While all of this assured that third parties would find suc-

cess elusive, it accorded them an important role in permitting the further stability of two-party rule. At the most basic level, either of the parties, under the right circumstances, could find partisan uses for an ostensibly independent bid for power.

After the implosion of Reconstruction, Republicans in the South found their condition hopeless, as did Democrats in New England. Factions of both episodically gave strong support to independent politics in hopes of breaking down the locally dominant parties, though the national leaderships remained ambivalent about such ventures.

More fundamentally, though, third parties provided the dominant parties a clear measure of how and why public sentiment might be threatening to outgrow the juvenile distractions of tariffs and "identity politics" (in the original sense). Those extensive third party efforts in the Reconstruction and its aftermath redirected one or both of the major parties to issues and concerns that required attention. Essential to this, the two-party system learned to translate insurgent concerns into a "public opinion" that could be safely addressed in the language of stability and order. Mere protest, then, permitted an ongoing renewal of the legitimacy of the existing power structure.

Much of this turned on the success of the two parties in using the threat allegedly posed by "the Other." Both parties agreed on the subjugation of the native peoples in the unsettled western territories internal to the United States. Beyond this, the more agrarian Democrats had some very traditional mild interest in Latin America, while the more commercially concerned Republicans tended to look towards Asia.

The Spanish-American War at the close of the century addressed these bipartisan ambitions, waging wars to finally secure U.S. dominion over Cuba but also over the Philippines. Rudyard Kipling, the great British poet of imperialism versified his salute to the American willingness to “take up the white man’s burden.”

What Theodore Roosevelt called a “splendid little war” established all the key features of later conflicts in which the United States would chose to engage. The American people had never gone to the polls and elected pro-war candidates to take power. Rather, the decisions to launch the conflict took place behind closed doors. Those who wanted war leaked disinformation (about the sinking of the *USS Maine*, in this case), shaping public perceptions in such a way as to where the people would permit waging the war, and then went to war claiming that public had insisted upon it.

On the home front, the Panic of 1893 had plunged the country into a depression. The armed resistance of Native Americans came to an end and Frederick Jackson Turner, of the new historical profession, read his influential paper declaring an end to the frontier. The Midwest, which had supplied most of the presidents since the Lincoln, faded in importance before New York and the centers of financial capital in the northeast.

Progressive Reform — Moving Forward?

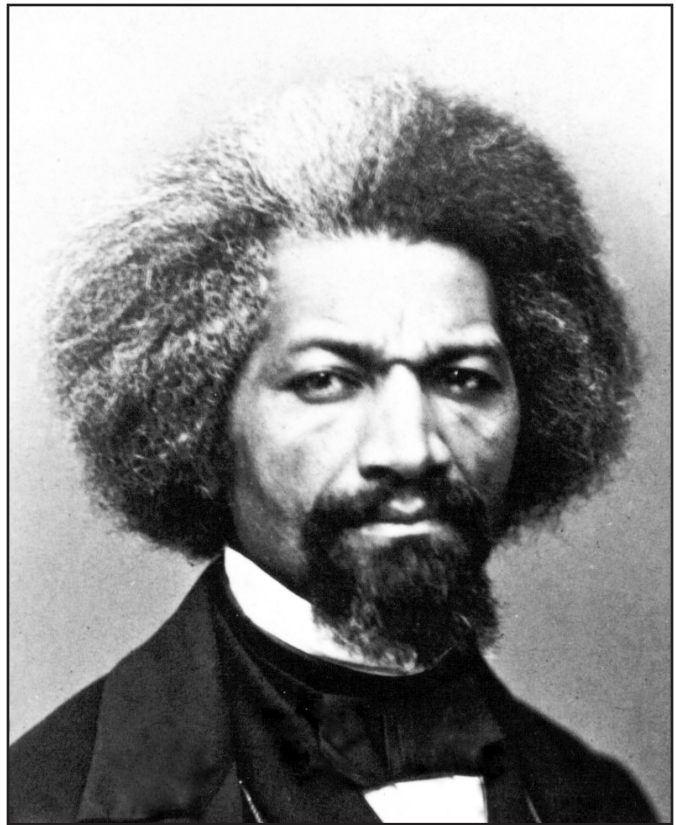
The Progressive reform movement that emerged around the turn of the century marked the greatest political shift since the Civil War, and represented the system’s response to citizen discontent and the threat of alternative parties. The 1912 presidential election illustrates how the politicians themselves acknowledged the deep desire of the American public: each and every candidate heading the parties ran as a “Progressive.”

Pro-gress — as the opposite of re-gress — meant moving forward rather than going backward, but moving forward all depends on which way you’re facing. So the Niagara movement — what became the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People — fell under the rubric of “Progressive,” as did the “New South” segregationists imposing Jim Crow. One kind of “progress” not only never predominated, but would be largely repressed in this period.

The voters’ choice between two parties had nothing to do with this great change. That is, no one party would take up the idea of greater government involvement in the economic and social life of the nation and triumph at the polls over a more conservative position taken by the other party. Rather, the “Progressive” idea gained currency in both parties, as reflected by the ascendancy of figures such as Teddy Roosevelt among the Republicans and William Jennings Bryan among the Democrats. TR’s entry into the White House — and that of his successors, William H. Taft and Woodrow Wilson — reshaped the role of government.

The older rules that informed how the economy and government functioned had permitted the chaotic phase of industrial expansion, but that process had run its course and became an obstacle to its future, fuller development. As business took up the idea of “scientific management,” politicians took up “Progressive” politics.

Capitalist rule now required change. Unsanitary conditions in the cities not only affected the working poor but interfered



Where justice is denied, where poverty is enforced, where ignorance prevails, and where any one class is made to feel that society is an organized conspiracy to oppress, rob and degrade them, neither persons nor property will be safe.

— Frederick Douglass

with production. Once germinated, diseases growing from the slums did not stay there. Access to cheap child labor discouraged investment in new technologies requiring more skill, experience and strength — nor did it fuel the kind of mass public education then permitting Germany to leap forward industrially and scientifically. Simply put, the idea of a legislated minimum wage, unemployment insurance, workmen’s compensation and other reforms suited a restructuring of the American economy.

The War and the 1920s

In Germany, reforms sought to undercut the threat of a mass socialist party and to bring workers into a partnership around the impression of “social imperialism.” Although it faced a serious test in the crisis of 1914 with the outbreak of the world war, only years of hunger, disease and death brought loyalties to a breaking point.

Wilson’s United States initially avoided being pulled into the industrial meat grinder, but encouraged investments in British victory, which meant that when the Russian Revolution of 1917 threatened Britain’s victory, America had to enter the war directly. This made Britain’s “war to end all wars” into the U.S. “war to make the world safe for democracy.”

As with the sinking of the *Maine* in 1898, these justifications proved less than honest. However, backed by a virtually monopoly over the media, they marked the extent to which this or any modern government could twist the truth to its own purposes and their people would accept it. Despite serious losses, the United States emerged from the war as the only industrial power essentially unscathed. Neither major party objected to the war, nor to the treatment that waging it imposed on the people.

So too, by the 1920s — under the Republican administrations of Warren G. Harding, Calvin Coolidge and Herbert Hoover — American capitalism entered the age where fortunes could be made through a consumer economy. Yet the prosperity associated with the period always remained very restricted to certain sectors.

The white middle class prospered and many skilled workers with them. Industrial workers and people of color did not fare so well. The difference turned largely on the question of creditworthiness, determining who could participate in a better life that had to be bought on an installment plan. New innovations in finance extended the kind of credit business got to private individuals. It permitted workers and citizens generally to behave as consumers. New construction of housing and automobiles fueled this new kind of prosperity.

Suffrage expanded again after the war. Women had fought for generations to get the vote, implying that mothers would never permit children to be raised in poverty or send their sons to idiotic wars. The authorities gave the privilege only after a range of local experiences and women's participation in the war effort had demonstrated that they would generally use the ballot in the same way as their fathers, brothers and husbands. Towards the close of the decade, government accorded the same privilege to the remnants of the virtually exterminated population of native peoples.

Essential to this were the new techniques of marketing, advertising and public relations, which became equally vital political tools for those who could afford access to them. These new skills allowed those "Progressives" who would actually define what mattered to redefine the concerns of the Equal Rights, Negro Republican, Greenback, Greenback-Labor, Union Labor, United Labor, Socialistic Labor, Populist, Socialist Labor, Socialist, or Progressive parties and to repackage them.

The result ignored concerns about racial segregation and inequality, women's rights, and ultimately the priority of capitalist interests in formulating and implementing government policies. The packaging did, however, work after a fashion.

The World War radically intensified the government reliance on managing perceptions. Earlier versions of the political management system had fueled mass fears, against which it could offer relief and protection, with particular regional attention focused on African Americans, Native Americans, Latinos, Asians, even Catholics. The advent of genuine imperialism focused these fears even more safely be focused on foreigners with whom Americans would be even more likely

to remain strangers.

During the war, the authorities successfully identified domestic radicalism with the designated national enemy, the Germans. They broke strikes, assassinated critics and effectively suspended the Bill of Rights for any groups they designated to be a threat, most notably the Socialist Party and the Industrial Workers of the World.

With the Russian Revolution and the war's end, the discontent of the world's peoples took many forms troubling to the ruling classes, including the unprecedented 1919 strike wave. Governments and reactionaries everywhere used the international character of this upsurge to identify radicals with the "international communist conspiracy."

As we have seen, all of this changed the nature of American civic culture. Newspapers, news syndicates, and later radio made mass organizations unnecessary for the major parties.

This permitted the news

blackouts of third parties, whether Weaver in 1880 or 1892, or Robert LaFollette in 1924, Henry Wallace in 1948, or Ralph Nader in 2000.

This reliance on media also provided a new, allegedly independent adjudicator that would decide what was an issue and who would be a serious candidate. The industry that gets to decide which candidates are serious enough to cover just happens to pick those who will provide them the most revenues.

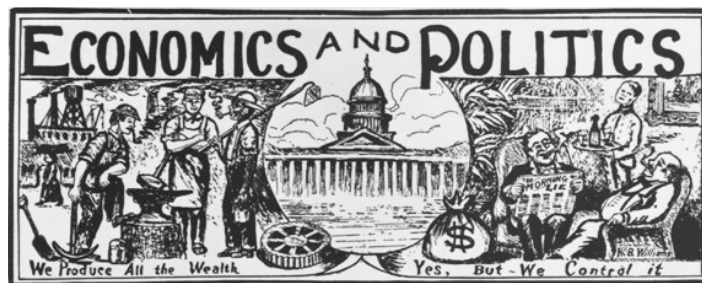
While it extended the defining commercial concerns of American "journalism," however, the mass communication that allowed for this kind of politics required vastly more amounts of money.

According to the American Presidency Project, the cost of the hard-fought 1860 election remained under \$200,000. (The project website is <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/>. A chart summarizing financing is on <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/data/financing.php>.) By 1880 — the first national election after the end of Reconstruction — the Republicans alone spent \$1.1 million.

By 1892, the two parties spent well over \$4 million, and this rose to well over \$12 million by the close of the 1920s. What had begun as a system for government of the elite, by the elite and for the elite had managed to become even more skewed against efforts of ordinary people who work for their living to use party politics for their own purposes.

As in the past, the only reason the beneficiaries at the top of this hierarchy would change it would be serious pressure from below. Yet the regulator legacy of Progressivism also included a new Federal Bureau of Investigation, local red squads, private armies, and the Justice Department. These engaged in the active repression of the every genuinely oppositional formation, from the Socialist Party to the Universal Negro Improvement Association.

As with Progressive reform generally, both parties embraced the practice of waging this kind of silent war to blunt unauthorized political input. ■



"Why Negroes Should Be Socialists,"

The Messenger, November 1919

The Two-Party System, Part 3

To A Consumer and Warfare State

By Mark A. Lause

AMERICANS WHO ARE predisposed to “progressive” ideas regularly praise the merits of pragmatism and flexibility, while denouncing “rigidity and dogmatism.”

Most often they do this to disparage the idea of doing anything other than voting Democratic. From their perspective, flexibility and pragmatism means seeing the election of Democrats as the way to foster a more just, rational and peaceful world. In reality, offering only one course against all possible alternatives is practically the definition of an inflexible dogma.

This perceived marriage of “progressive” change and the Democratic Party grew from conditions that prevailed from the 1930s through the 1960s. The next half century sustained this faith less through positive policies than by comforting images. Integral to this has been the rise of a warfare state with its own logic. The implications of both have made a two-party political order unchanged by the end of either World War II or the Cold War.

Making of a Faith

One of the regularly promulgated fairy tales about capitalism is that the sum total of the individual market decisions creates the best outcome. In the face of imploding demand, individual business naturally responds by slowing production and laying people off. However, in the complex 20th century economy into which capitalism had grown, the sum total of what would be rational individual decisions spelled economic collapse. Decreasing production by increasing unemployment only decreased demand further.

Much of the business community understood this after the crash of 1929, but without common rules they acted individually against their own collective self-interest. While both parties remained preoccupied with this problem, the most immediate victims had more pressing concerns.

Homeless Americans clustered in the unused margins of their cities in what they called “Hoovervilles” in honor of the president. Large numbers organized for direct action, as when desperate farmers organized holiday associations to protect their livelihoods. In the cities, the unemployed organized, regularly thwarting evictions for nonpayment of rent. Periodically, collective waves of humanity raged through the new corporate supermarkets, seizing what they and their families needed.

In reaction to President Hoover’s perceived indifference, voters turned to Franklin D. Roosevelt — Theodore’s Democratic cousin — and ultimately restructured the party system. Whatever its record on slavery, secession and segregation, the Democratic Party remade itself as a viable instrument of reform.

By the 1932 election of FDR, those elements of the ruling class in the northeast concerned with finance and planning had taken charge of the nation’s affairs, and proved willing to accept a particularly aggressive kind of “scientific management” by the government. Recalling the government’s mobilization of the economy in the world war, FDR approached the Depression as a threat that justified a similar exercise of power, as part of an international trend.

The end of the First World War had created a financial crisis across the industrial world. In part, mass social discontent with the war had helped end it, but the broken economies, indebted governments and armies of unemployed continued the strife. In response, ruling class solutions turned on the creation of new stronger states, aided by extralegal means of repression. Facing civil war that continued the devastation and death of the world war, the new Soviet Union aped these solutions.

In acutely desperate circumstances, such as Italy and Germany, right-wing gangs came to power, initially with the support of most of the world capitalist class. Having been marginal to the crisis, the United States adopted a less extreme version of reliance on the capitalist state to order the economy.

FDR certainly favored taking the same approach to the Depression as to the world war in that he abandoned the sanctions against deficit spending. However, he remained silent about what, beyond the repeal of Prohibition, that new government role would entail. He came into power bringing with him a group of businessmen, lawyers, academics and others that came to be called his “Brain Trust,” which had no coherent approach to most questions.

The “First New Deal” offered a series of pragmatic measures, including various make-work projects, attempting to cap it all with a National Recovery Administration. Bolstered by gains in the 1934 election, the Democrats launched a “Second New Deal” that included: the Works Progress Administration to make work for a wide variety of occupations; the Social Security Act; the Wagner Act, finally sanctioning the right of American workers to form unions; and, the Fair Labor Standards Act.

None of this fundamentally restructured the Democratic Party, whose power still rested on the continued hegemony of the party in the South, sustained by its segregationist wing. Partly because the South had yet to have recovered from the loss of its key position as the source of cotton for the western world, these otherwise conservative politicians proved willing to participate in these New Deal experiments, so long as these did not threaten their regional power base.

These reforms rarely aimed simply to aid those who

needed it. The Agricultural Adjustment Act, for example, did not really tinker with the nature of the market, but sought to reduce farm products in order to have them provide greater revenue to farmers. As this involved paying people for not growing crops, those with vast amounts of land became much greater beneficiaries than the proverbial Pa and Ma Kettle.

Over the decades, some of the biggest right-wing ideologues denouncing welfare cheats annually walked away with checks into the millions for not growing crops on their swamplands. This approach defined a kind of liberalism that artificially inflated the cost of social relief though a kind of self-imposed bribe to the wealthy.

Nevertheless, the old elites often resisted these innovations. The Supreme Court regularly declared them unconstitutional and the former Democratic leaders and corporate executives spearheaded a new “American Liberty League,” joined by more conservative Republicans and corporate leaders from across a spectrum.

The Depression radicalized, among others, U.S. Marine Corps General Smedley Butler, who had fallen from grace with his support of the veterans’ Bonus March. Although he publicly complained of having had a career as “a racketeer for capitalism,” his prominence and popularity inspired several figures from the American Legion to approach him on behalf of a group interested in his taking charge of an attempted coup. The Congressional committee later heard his testimony, but refused to call any of those Butler named, and without such testimony the press dismissed it all as a great hoax.

Ultimately, Republican leaders acknowledged in 1936 that voters wanted innovation by nominating Alf Landon, who — like Hoover before him — had earlier bolted from the GOP to support FDR’s cousin on the Progressive ticket. Aside from his hostility to unions, Landon could well be described as a pro-New Deal Republican, though not enough to prevent FDR’s winning by the largest landslide in U.S. history.

Many — including the large and prominent Communist Party — sought to read a consistent direction into FDR’s approach. Certainly, a lot of people got back to work and launched an unprecedented drive for industrial unionism that established the new Congress of Industrial Organizations.

The evidence suggests, however, that these were byproducts of often contradictory policies unfolding in fits and starts. For example, FDR’s attempt to cut government spending created the “Roosevelt recession” of 1937-38, to which voters responded by replacing many Democrats in Congress with Progressives or Farmer-Laborites as well as Republicans.

The reforms of the New Deal never actually ended the Depression. After a series of crises through the decade, world war erupted again in September 1939. The United States stayed out of the conflict but, after the German conquest of France in June 1940, formulated a cash-and-carry program to create a wartime economy to fuel the British war effort. In March 1941, it adopted the Lend-Lease policy that extended

Britain and its Allies the material of war on credit.

Hot and Cold Running Wars

With a head start meeting British demands for the materials of war, the United States found itself the target of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.

Thereafter, FDR asked for and got a formal declaration of war, the last genuinely constitutional U.S. entry into a war — and it has not stopped fighting since. For 73 years now, a permanent war-time economy, and the need to maintain it, has framed everything about U.S. politics.

Nothing gave the voters a choice. As with every other major change in American politics, the two-party system did not permit voters their input into this decision. Rather, the advent of a permanent war economy echoed what happened with Progressive reform, the ending of Reconstruction, the importance of cotton slavery and every other fundamental consideration in our political history. The two parties did not take opposite positions on the permanent wartime economy and offer voters a choice between them.

Certainly, the rise of Italian fascism and German Nazism presented a kind of capitalism gone mad, resurrecting ancient brutalities in pursuit of some racial purism. The great U.S. rival in the Pacific, Japan, allied with them and waged total war and all that entailed. The Axis powers waged war by bombing, relocating, and destroying entire populations.

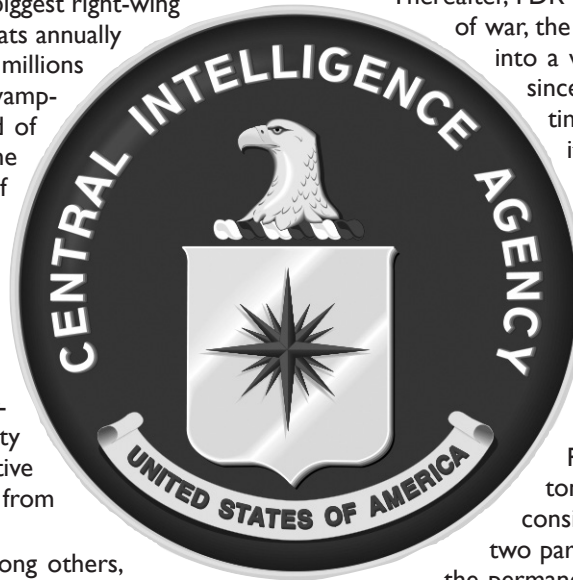
The war with which the United States and its Allies responded was no less total. This nation became the first and only one to use atom bombs on an enemy, both Hiroshima and Nagasaki being civilian targets. The United States even incarcerated sections of its own population on purely ethnic grounds, without a hint of illegal activities on their part or of constitutional due process. Neither side mitigated their ruthlessness when dealing with weaker foes.

A National Security State

World War II changed absolutely everything about our society. The new American economy — like that of the Russians and others — had used wartime production to escape the Depression, and would not risk slipping back into it. As after World War I, U.S. power emerged virtually unscathed as the dominant force on the planet. When FDR died and Harry Truman took charge of the nation’s affairs, he extended the wartime economy with the Truman Doctrine aimed against our former Soviet allies.

This did not change with the national victories of Eisenhower the Republican or when the Democrat Kennedy took the presidency, or under each subsequent president, whether the Democrats under Johnson, Carter or Clinton or Republicans under Nixon, Ford, Reagan and the two Bushes. Indeed, the two parties not only agreed on the military and economic premises of the Cold War, but on silencing any questions about them.

In 1947, the National Security Act not only codified the



economic and political priorities of participating in a world war, but fundamentally superseded the older commitment to constitutional procedures. It established a new Central Intelligence Agency, alleged to have been the mere extension of the wartime Office of Strategic Services.

But the OSS grew out of the need to overthrow the Nazis, fascists or Japanese militarists, goals that had become obviously irrelevant after 1945. The CIA, in contrast, needed professional spies, saboteurs and analysts focused on the Soviet Union and the rising threat of nationalist revolutions in the Third World. Nazi defectors such as Reinhardt Gehlen and his Eastern European bureau formed the core of the personnel and ideology of the state. What would constrain the militarist predispositions of the ex-generals and admirals who headed the CIA would be a civilian National Security Agency, a meaningless figleaf entirely abandoned in the 1980s when the Reagan administration simply began appointing the same kind of military figures to run the NSA as the CIA.

After 1947, the United States would never again declare a war as required by the Constitution, and never again would it be at peace.

The national security state offered various mission statements to define its purposes. Perhaps the most blood-chilling was that of the Doolittle Committee, declaring in 1954 that the United States faced “an implacable enemy whose avowed objective is world domination by whatever means and at whatever cost. There are no rules in such a game. Hitherto acceptable norms of human conduct do not apply. If the United States is to survive, longstanding American concepts of ‘fair play’ must be reconsidered. We must develop effective espionage and counterespionage services and must learn to subvert, sabotage and destroy our enemies by more clever, more sophisticated and more effective methods than those used against us.”¹

The Public Relations Internal Cold War

The permanent wartime state represented the most important innovation in American political history. As with Emancipation or Progressive reform, the two-party system had nothing to do with it. The Democrats who had led the nation into two world wars led it into a third, “Cold War,” to the cheers of the Republicans.

Over time, the ascendancy of the so-called “defense” sector — along with the rise of the petrochemical industry — would transform the “Sun Belt.” In the 1960s, with the killing of John F. Kennedy, a long succession of presidents from the region assumed power. Although a resignation allowed the brief unelected presidency of Ford (MI), the list included: Johnson (TX), Nixon (CA), Carter (GA), Reagan (CA), Bush (TX), Clinton (AR), and Bush II (TX).

Although the term “McCarthyism” came to be applied to the intolerance of the age — after Republican Senator Joe McCarthy who began to realize the importance of media in shaping public perceptions — Democratic President Truman actually promulgated the loyalty oaths, the purging from government and public life of Communists, suspected Communists, or people who had ever attended a meeting with Communists or read a Communist newspaper.

Part of this climate represented the sheer exhaustion and relief of a generation that had been through turmoil of the Great Depression and WWII, and emerged into the wealthiest

consumer society the world had ever known. The automobile drove the new housing boom directly to the suburbs. The Baby Boom fueled this expanding consumer economy, and the top-down, one-way communication of television guided it.

Citizen-consumers learned what was important and relevant through a corporate “news” media that never abandoned its uncritical wartime stance towards the government, its wars, and its official political decision-making system. A deep, pervasive conformity characterized the postwar years, save for those who could afford an alternative lifestyle — or those whose conformity the society would not accept.

African Americans did share in some of the postwar prosperity, but the color bar still kept them from using what wealth they had to educate their children, buy a new home and a car. Their organization for civil rights provided an unusually bright spot in a dim period, but the most intransigent advocates of segregation remained in the Democratic Party, members of which had resisted any Federal intervention to secure Black equality before the law. When the issue reached the Congress in a wave of legislation from 1964 through 1968, politicians did not divide along simple party lines.

Revolt and Reaction

The eruption of new social movements raised other questions. The brutal escalation of the U.S. war in Indochina — premised on phony stories about North Vietnamese attacks on American ships — intensified conscription and led to massive protests, particularly on the college campuses. A movement for women’s liberation raised issues of equality that struck a responsive chord among gays and lesbians.

Latinos — both Chicanos in the southwest and Puerto Ricans in the major cities of the northeast — followed the course of African American protests, later followed by Native Americans and Asians. These did not represent traditional class movements, but offered clear challenges to capitalism, while the traditional trade union organizations continued to press the claims of the Democratic Party.

Nevertheless, none of these movements had any particularly close friendship with one party over another. When the women’s movement focused on the idea of an Equal Rights Amendment, they had Republican allies and Democratic opponents, both directly and surreptitiously. Those involved in these movements, too, tended to mirror the changing views of the voters, who tended to describe themselves increasingly as “Independent,” although those actually voting increasingly tended to be conservative.

Black frustration over the delays and dishonesty also boiled over, particularly when Lyndon Johnson turned towards funding his war in Vietnam. Bipartisan cooperation deepened in 1970 when a future Democratic Senator (Daniel Patrick Moynihan) suggested to a Republican president that they treat any further action on race with “benign neglect.” Bad as this was, the 1972 reelection of Nixon represented a crushing defeat that pushed the Democratic Party on the ever rightward trajectory it has embraced hereafter.

A political party facing such a defeat could go out, engage, register, and bring into the system the hitherto disenfranchised around an agenda that would serve them. However, success through such an approach would tend to leave the victorious party answerable to those constituencies. It might also opt for simply competing with its rival through its tech-

niques of television ads and images.

The Democrats took the latter course, barring caucuses of Blacks, Latinos, women, labor, gays and others from their conventions because they presented the wrong image to those who were voting Republican. They did not bar the organization of well-heeled Sun Belt Democrats who took the future of the party into its hands, and began moving it inexorably away from its “liberal” image.

It later became clear how Nixon had engineered that 1972 victory. Out of the White House, his campaign had organized “plumbers” to fix the leaks in the government, and these quickly turned to acts of sabotage against an “enemies list” of private citizens and the Democratic Party. This culminated in a break-in at the Watergate hotel, a coverup and its unraveling.

Nixon received the same courtesy as his first vice president (Spiro Agnew) when he was caught in criminal activity. Once he resigned, both parties and the media declared that “the system worked.” Congress closed its investigations without ever asking many of the toughest questions. A few underlings did short sentences in white collar prisons, and the president himself left office until media eventually brought him back episodically as an “elder statesman.”

This bipartisan agreement not to prosecute criminal activity had far reaching consequences a few years later. At the close of the decade, revolutions in Nicaragua and Iran destabilized the Carter administration, and Reagan — surrounded by former CIA, military officials, and contractors — worked around the administration to use the crisis to prevent “an October surprise” that might successfully resolve the problem.

As Reagan came into office, he also established his own distinct relationship with both Iran and the opponents of the new Sandinista government in Nicaragua. It transpired that his administration had been seizing government weapons for sale to the Iranians, and using the proceeds to finance the CIA’s army against a government that the United States officially recognized.

The unraveling of this “Iran-Contra affair” went far beyond Watergate, in that the criminal activities went beyond individuals around the president to include elements of the government itself — and yet proved even less consequential. The Democrats did not even mount an investigation as serious as they had over Watergate, and permitted witnesses to lie without later calling them back.

Republicans continued to trumpet their idolatry of the mythical free market and an ethos of what some have called “Cowboy Capitalism,” all sanctified by a resurgent Christian Fundamentalism. Democrats increasingly tended to win election based on their alliances with new technologies, and promises of a more expert management of the same policies advocated by Republicans.

Republicans generally served the petrochemical and defense industries of the Sun Belt. Yet for six of Reagan’s eight years, the Democrats controlled Congress. They agreed on matters such as media deregulation, and permitting corpo-

rations to maximize profits and minimize taxes through the export of America’s industrial base. Later, Democrats continued the policies that permitted and encouraged the loss of American jobs.

The benign neglect that had worked for civil rights came to be extended to environmental concerns, health care, the minimum wage, and virtually any question that did not have an army of lobbyists fighting on its behalf. In addition to other oppositional ideologies, waves of libertarian sentiment appealed to an almost religious faith in the mythical “free market.” Despite being ignored or attacked, environmentalism continued to emerge as a critical mass concern, though only in recent years as any kind of organized movement.

We, the Black masses, don't want these leaders who seek our support coming to us representing a certain political party. They must come to us today as Black Leaders representing the welfare of Black people. We won't follow any leader today who comes on the basis of political party. Both parties (Democrat and Republican) are controlled by the same people who have abused our rights, and who have deceived us with false promises every time an election rolls around.

—Malcolm X

The Stampede of Dollars

According to the American Presidency Project,² the two major parties spent a total of less than \$13 million to elect a president in 1956. In the next campaign, Kennedy’s victory over Nixon demonstrated the decisive nature of television, and politics became more and more about buying media time. Twenty years later, when Reagan entered the White House after a long apprenticeship as a minor Hollywood star-turned-corporate spokesman, the two parties spent \$58.8 million.

However dramatic this increase of financing in presidential elections, the flow of money has poured into every other level of electoral politics, including for relatively minor offices. Elections within specific districts turned increasingly on outside funding. By the 1980s, state and local campaigns often cost more than national presidential elections of a few decades before.

Alongside many of the regulations and regimentations installed during these years, came the “progressive” insistence upon an exclusive strategy of voting Democratic. Public relations aside, for decades, the Democratic Party has hardly attempted to address the poverty, racism, or sexism experienced by the majority of its voters. Nor has it even secured the simple right to unionize for American workers, or decent standards of longterm environmental health.

In contrast, it has fully participated in the construction of the warfare state, the anti-republican and undemocratic national surveillance and security monster, and the undisguised commercialization of electoral politics. The “progressive” punditry has responded with an increasingly dogmatic insistence that any politics other than promoting electoral success for the Democrats — including mass, independent demonstrations — gives aid and comfort to the reactionaries and must be crushed or derailed.

An honest discussion of more genuinely flexible and pragmatic alternatives is overdue. ■

Notes

1. Doolittle Committee. Panel of Consultants on Covert Activities by the Central Intelligence Agency [1954] in Leary, ed., *The Central Intelligence Agency: History and Documents*, 144.

2. The project website is <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/>. A chart summarizing financing is on <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/data/financing.php>.

The Two-Party System, Part 4

Where We Are Now

By Mark A. Lause

THE POWER STRUCTURE in the West and its institutional translators hailed the implosion of the USSR and its allies as the ultimate vindication of capitalism — as though the failure of one thing proves anything about another. Some even resurrected assertions about the end of ideology and the end of history.

As after 1945, the loss of its primary enemy forced an economy and society geared for war to find new enemies. The 1980s launched an international “war on drugs,” and 20 years later, the United States declared its “global war on terror.” Since both adversaries are endemic to the modern world — indeed to some extent byproducts of American policy — these amount to waging an undeclared but terribly lucrative and useful war without end.

The U.S. emergence as the world’s dominant superpower changed everything about the nature of politics within the country. Cold War liberals often rationalized the insane levels of military spending, and what they called the “abuses” of “McCarthyism,” as temporary obstacles to the assumed democratization and social progress of American civilization.

The end of the Cold War demonstrated the fallacy of all that, exposing the permanent character of the U.S. warfare-national security state. While it might have led to a new discussion over national priorities, the easiest option involved finding another international enemy.

Yet the fact that the U.S. did not turn its resources to the abolition of poverty, medical research or any genuine improvement of the quality of life has changed nothing in the arguments of Cold War liberalism. Rather, liberals simply recycled their excuses for not pressing for change because of communism into assertions about the assertions about the necessities of fighting “drugs” or “terrorism.”

All this leaves various alternatives to those who remember the past and seek to use it wisely to shape a more livable future.

Adventures of a Super-duper Megapower

Ronald Reagan’s “war on drugs,” followed by a “war on terrorism,” would continue Cold War priorities in new channels, permitting even more lucrative opportunities. What we used to honestly call the merchants of death moved into new technologies, from Reagan’s Star Wars through the armed drones beloved of the Obama administration.

The nature of the war required pinning drugs and/or terrorism on the map. While the senior Bush and Clinton moved quietly into the Balkans and Eastern Europe, the rapidly increasing use of fossil fuels centered the attention of the world on the Mideast. And the most powerful military force

on the planet — the United States really had no close rivals in that respect — insisted upon a major role in the management of it.

U.S. strategy had long relied on two client states sitting like bookends on either end of the oilfields. The loss of the Shah of Iran in 1979 left Washington more dependent on Israel, whose government simply set aside its commitments to peace with the Palestinians in the agreements negotiated by Carter.

To restore its balance, U.S. policy urgently needed a major ally in the Muslim world. There existed no shortage of candidates. The Carter and Reagan administrations had already become involved with the Saudi-backed terrorists working to subvert the secularist government of Afghanistan that had been allied to the USSR.

While contributing to the ascendancy of what became the Taliban and al-Qaeda, Washington also established ties to the government of Iraq. The Reagan cabal financed and equipped both Iraq and the new government of Iran during the prolonged and bloody war between them. Operating on the idea that it could make contradictory agreements in secret made enemies for the United States on all sides.

A U.S. military presence followed. To the cheers of the contractors and generals — armchair and otherwise — America seemed to have finally shed “the Vietnam syndrome.” After giving mixed signals to Iraq about the “adjustment of its borders” with Kuwait, the U.S. opportunity came when Saddam Hussein annexed the oil kingdom. Washington launched Bush Senior’s Saudi-funded 1991 First Gulf War, cheered by a delighted media.

Pundits even talked of Bush winning reelection without Democratic opposition in 1992. In the end, the cost brought down Bush and established the U.S. as a brutalizing cynical force in the region, the target for the kind of terrorist groups that it had itself funded and encouraged.

Indeed, the enemies that the United States faced after the end of the Cold War had been largely its old beneficiaries. Both U.S. political parties had jointly managed — with nary a peep of difference — the government that had supported Noriega (in Panama) to Bin Laden to Saddam Hussein, but also agreed simultaneously to revise their assessment of them as enemies.

“Progressive” Dogmatism and its Great Betrayal

As evidence for its validity or usefulness faded, “progressive” institutions, organizations, and ideologues have clung tenaciously to their one great dogma, rooted in the faith that the two-party system remains an eternal, ultimately unchallengeable reality.

As with the most reactionary commentators, self-described “progressives” projected their own failures on those who declined to make them. This dogma asserts that it is more damaging to progressive interest to challenge the two-party system than to accept the need to stay within it. The more the evidence demonstrates that their own dogmatism has produced only bleak disasters, the more they ascribe those disasters to those who rejected their groundless faith-based strategy of “working within the Democratic Party.”

The realities of electoral politics changed radically in the 20 years since Reagan’s deregulation of the media. The same corporate media transformed itself into what observers called a public affairs entertainment programming. Not only did cable television become endemic, but the growth of the internet has also helped provide new citizen-consumers with the power to choose the most comforting bits and pieces to structure their own sense of reality.

This made politics increasingly a conflict of hallucinations. In lieu of a debate over issues or even substantive values — matters of war and peace or global warming — “news” highlights what maximizes viewership (and advertising revenues).

With the presidency little more than a communicator, the mouthpiece for the real power remained in the large, unelected layers of what Eisenhower had quaintly called the Military-Industrial Complex, sustained by armies of lobbyists. Ironically, with politics increasingly reduced to the presidency, the presidency itself became increasingly an issue of celebrity.

Yet skepticism and resistance persisted, even at the ballot box. In the presidential election of 2000, Ralph Nader headed the largest independent progressive third party effort since 1948. Owing to the general media blackout on his campaign, the millions of Americans who voted for him actually represented a considerably larger portion of those voters who were aware of the option.

The presidential election of 2000 cost the American people more than double what they had spent 20 years earlier. In return for over \$135.1 million they cast their votes and got a president who got fewer of them than his opponent. Nothing more clearly confessed the absence of any Democratic agenda distinct from warmed-over Reaganism than their failure to wage an effective fight for the office they had won.

Consistent with their self-gratifying dogmatism, Democratic apologists insisted that they lost the election not because they chose not to mount an effective challenge to being counted out in Florida, but because too many voters had supported Nader. Later, as Democrats cravenly followed George W. Bush in foisting horrific policies on the nation, their “progressive” allies continued to insist that responsibility for those policies fell on the Nader campaign rather than on the Democratic Bushlings they had helped push upon the voters.

The assertion that those who do challenge the two-party system are objectively aiding the more reactionary forces in society has become all the more adamant the more disgusted

voters are inclined to look for something better than what the Democrats have ever offered. Too, more than in the past, part of the disparagement of independent action of any sort has come to include the active hostility to street demonstrations and strikes.

Democrats responded to Bush’s victory by functioning as loyal promoters of the Republican agenda on every single major initiative of his administration. Most despicably, the Democrats embraced measures more draconian than those of the Cold War in response to Bush’s war on terror, sparked by the attacks of September 11, 2001, the forewarnings of which the White House failed to take seriously. Perhaps the most depressing and disgusting political development that people my age have ever witnessed was the liberal (and labor) willingness to join with the rest of the Democratic Party in embracing Bush’s doctrine of preemptive war. They have also since become eager apologists for the despicable assertion that the government can lawfully kidnap, torture and/or kill any human being on the planet, including U.S. citizens, without the least accountability.

That constitutional authorities and lawyers could make such arguments with a straight face — that liberals and progressives would defend such things — amounts to conceding the utter bankruptcy of the system.

Lurching Into Crisis

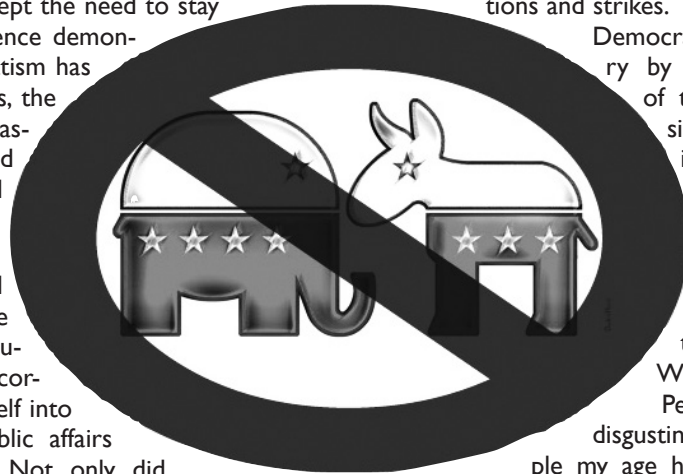
To some extent, though, the chickens came home to roost. Capitalism’s marked lack of self-reflection, characteristic of the Cold War, greeted the fall of the Soviet Union in a celebratory orgy of unrestrained and unaccountable greed that closed the 20th and opened the 21st century with an unprecedented polarization of wealth.

From the savings and loans crisis on, government repeatedly bailed out large corporations in trouble. After the first few years of this, Clinton and the Democrats insisted that the nation had to pay for the prosperity it had enjoyed in the 1980s, but that this burden should be shared by those who enjoyed none of that prosperity.

Then, in 2008, the financial house of cards collapsed. The administration of Bush Junior proposed an unprecedented no-strings attached \$700 billion bailout of the endangered banks and corporations, and the Democrats hurried to go on record in favor of it. There were no bailouts for the people, no challenge to the doctrinal hostility to progressive taxes.

The public turned to the relatively unknown Democratic contender, Barack Obama, a Black legislator from Illinois and first-term U.S. Senator. Those who remembered FDR or LBJ saw Obama as somehow the embodiment of New Deal or Great Society traditions. Those who did not saw the photogenic African-American fresh face offering platitudes about hope and change.

It was broadly believed that Obama would end the wars, undo the camps, the torture, the surveillance state, and restore some of the worst cuts over the previous 20 years. In fact, though, Obama broke all records in terms of fundraising



and got more corporate money than anyone who ever ran for president. His campaign declined public funds, which left it greater options in terms of private financing.

The American Presidency Project reports that, in 2008, the Obama campaign spent nearly \$746 million, with the Republicans still at \$350 million, totaling a vast increase over what both parties spent in 2000. Worse, according to Center for Responsive Politics and the Open Secrets website, the 2012 presidential election cost \$2.6 BILLION (!) — with overall campaign funding of \$6.3 billion.*

This realization sufficiently explains the dominant concerns of the new Democratic administration. Upon taking power, the Democrats saw the \$700 billion bipartisan bailout of the Bush administration and raised it by an \$831 billion bipartisan stimulus package. As with the Republican-initiated bailout, the Democratic-initiated stimulus offered no comparable help for those facing foreclosures, unemployment, rising tuition costs, and the other exigencies of the depressed economy.

In short, the two-party system provided yet another demonstration of just how the two-parties really compete with each other, only as rivals in their unblinking servitude to money and power. In fact, the victory of the Democrats actually deepened the trends they had been elected to modify or thwart. That is, the government continued to pull funding for hospitals, schools and public services — and then used the lack of funding to privatize these functions as much as possible.

Real wages and salaries collapsed. Unions that had pinned everything on having Democratic allies in government found themselves under persistent attack, losing members and powers at an unprecedented level.

More than this, Obama's Justice Department, which repeatedly refused to investigate, much less indict criminal activities by the Republicans who had preceded them, has been even more vigorous in prosecuting whistle-blowers exposing wrongdoing in government and business. It has continued the policy of secret assassinations, as well as expanding the waging of undeclared war to new countries.

And the Democrats have actively deepened the mechanism for repression at home. This includes its unprecedented level of militarization of the police forces, even as these more blatantly brutalize African-Americans in the full confidence that they run no risk of direct interference by the Justice Department. The record is personified in the thuggery of Obama's former Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel, whose mayoralty in Chicago has seen an overt war on labor, the poor, minorities and those who dare demonstrate in that city, with the active collusion of the Department of Homeland Security.

Meanwhile, even as various Patriot Act measures stripped American citizens of long stated rights, including freedom of speech and expression, the U.S. Supreme Court's 2010 Citizens United decision ruled that dollars spent in electoral politics enjoyed the protection of free speech. Its 2014 Hobby Lobby case even mandated government respect for the moral sensibilities of soulless corporations declining to accord workers what they've earned, in deference to the allegedly

religious convictions of the business.

What Can Be Done?

The two-party system boils down to the idea of self-government into a perennial deference to those in charge of the government. It accords the citizens no real power in governing, other than periodically checking boxes on consumer satisfaction cards that don't even have space for "comments."

It is axiomatic that those with a vital stake in the *status quo* won't change it. Voting *alone* has never accomplished anything the power structure didn't want accomplished. After all, the party system evolved not to allow the people to make decisions but merely to ensure that only "responsible" parties and "respectable" politicians would decide how to cut wages for teachers or hike tuition for students or best shave Granny's allegedly extravagant

Social Security check.

What, Then, Can Be Done?

The people DO have the power to change things. History shows how people — not the dominant two parties — used their numbers to secure abolition, to challenge the idolatry of the non-existent free market, or to establish the most basic equal rights.

When large numbers of people reject their designated role as consumers of whatever the parties offer them and engage each other as citizens acting for their own concerns and interests, they force change. This challenges not only the power structure but institutions, organizations and leaderships that exist to mediate between the power structure and the discontented.

It is no accident that the historically more recent efforts for gay and transgendered rights have made great strides in all areas, precisely because they have acted independently from such traditionally mediating forces.

Related to the institutional structures are cultural ideas of "respectable" behavior that make even identifying the problems taboo. Unreflective people regularly assert that you have no right to any political views if you don't vote, which — given the general restrictiveness of elections — basically dismisses anything beyond the parties to whom most voting and news coverage is restricted.

Not discussing politics with our peers leaves one at the mercy of what we're told by media and government and the priorities attached to them. These cultural limitations leave women, people of color, or working people generally even more restricted to behaving as consumers picking the least bad item on the shelf.

As in other forms of advertising and public relations, media symbols belie the absence of substance. Republican candidates attend the Grand Ol' Opry even as they actively foster policies to permit companies to export jobs. Democrats preside over deepening levels of poverty imposed on African American communities but offer a Black president. Both parties have offered saleswomen suitable to specific demographics, all offering policies that will result ultimately in substantive harm to the lot of most women.



Had enough already?

All this fits a political universe where destroyers of the American economy wear flag lapel pins and those lobbying against the needs of poor do so in the name of religion.

So too, for half a century, the one thing that politicians, pundits, and professors of all sorts have emphasized is that “demonstrations don’t work.” To point out the obvious, they say this precisely because mass actions *do* work. In fact, taking the long view of our political history, independent mass action of one sort or another has been the only thing that has ever worked. Yet the “progressive” dogma persists that one must vote for “lesser evils” or be found guilty of aiding greater evils.

This has suited both parties. Republican rhetoric against women’s rights pandered to their base, and allowed the Democrats to use the “Republican war on women” to win votes without having to offer even the old hollow promise of doing something in terms of policy.

In fact, if you are willing to vote for someone because they are not quite as bad as the alternative, you are not simply throwing away your vote, but using your ballot to sanction a shift in policies away from your concerns. The long-term effect of this has allowed the Democrats to become — to use Clinton’s own term — “Eisenhower Republicans,” while Obamacare has essentially federalized the general health care schemes of Romney, Dole and Nixon. And it has carried the first modern republic, born in the struggle against monarchy, to the point where, in 2016, we will most likely be offered the choice of a Bush or a Clinton — dynastic figureheads to wield a kingly power over us while in office.

Following the lead of the AFL-CIO, many African-American organizations, and women’s groups, the “progressive left” rationalizes the same miserably failed doctrines. The Democratic Socialists of America, because “the U.S. electoral system makes third parties difficult to build” expects “progressive, independent political action will continue to occur in Democratic Party primaries . . .” Progressive Democrats of America declares that it “was founded in 2004 to transform the Democratic Party and our country.”**

By abstracting their values from what they do politically, they can imagine electing Wall Street flunkies as a means of fostering profound social progress because of what the voters have between their ears. In the social and political real world, a candidate who solicits votes based on his advocacy of draconian national security measures will likely promote those measures — regardless of what those who vote for him/her might be telling themselves, but have no means to socially and politically express.

Politicians and pundits playing on fear and hysteria — and on the desire to fit in — magnify their influence through those who echo their talking points. An almost hysterical sense of urgency certainly helps push people to vote against their own interests. Decade after decade, we have heard such “progressives” arguing that — just this one last time — we need to buy time for the people to put together a movement or build a better alternative than supporting the lesser evil. *But when have they then built such a movement?*

*For the American Presidency Project, see <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/>; and, for Open Secrets, see <http://www.opensecrets.org/news/2013/03/the-2012-election-our-price-tag-fin/>.

**See Section 5 of the 1990-95 update of the 1982 document “Where We Stand, Democratic Socialists of America, at http://www.dsusa.org/where_we_stand#strat. First line of the self-description of Progressive Democrats of America, <http://www.pdamerica.org/>.

Not after 2012. Not after 2008. Not after 2004. Not ever. The very fact that they still make the argument is a monument to the Civic Attention Deficit Disorder that is the cornerstone of American two-party politics.

Moreover, under the pressure of these arguments organized labor, women’s organizations, and even the designated spokespeople for the Black, Native American and Latino communities have also veered away from mass demonstrations, strikes or any sort of independent action. The very existence of dissenters from these lesser-evil rationalizations requires the faithful to demonstrate their rectitude by focusing their ire on the unbelievers.

Think Anew, Make Strategic Choices

The experience of our recent past underscores the need to establish a radical presence in American politics. People who can’t give electoral voice to their desire for change simply accept their social and political invisibility. Those unwilling to challenge the orchestrated two-party hysteria render themselves useless in this process. We need to start where we can, among those many people level-headed enough not to fall for this flim-flam but too disorganized, as yet, to formulate their response.

We need a long-term electoral strategy for positive change on matters of the systemic assault on the natural world, for resisting the mass immiseration of humanity, for peace, justice and equality. It should center on weakening the “progressive” habit of tailing the AFL-CIO’s support for the corporate Democratic Party, and its concomitant tendency to hallucinate the ghost of a comic-book superhero version of FDR.

Some have called for boycotting elections, and not voting is surely preferable to voting for what you don’t want. However, without making a public issue about *why* you are boycotting the election — something like a mass march on the Board of Elections — this solution has politically no impact, and is detrimental in that it diverts us from that central strategic concern.

Voting for an independent alternative would be better, but sometimes not much. The most primitive variant aims at no more than a “protest vote,” using the ballot for the “moral suasion” of those with power. Establishing an ongoing third party that does nothing for voters but permit their more regular “witnessing” is scarcely of more value.

There are often options that neither represent a section of the capitalist class at the polls nor take positions that bar us from supporting them in principle. The Green, Socialist, and Peace and Freedom Parties fall into this category, as do a number of others.

There is no reason why various socialist currents and the legions of independents interested in the issue could not combine into a general insurgent action committee. Such a formation could make endorsements, raise funds, even organize volunteer help. It could also discourage campaigns that divide the insurgent forces and weaken their impact, and encourage every effort to unite broadly all the available insurgent forces behind that common strategic goal.

Not only is such a first step strategically feasible, but a few successes along these lines could open the door to even wider options.

It is time to start getting serious and make a beginning. ■